

PROGRAM NOTES

Born in St-Ghislain in the county of Hainaut (now in Belgium), probably around 1420, Ockeghem enters the historical record in 1443 as a *vicaire-chanteur* at the church of Our Lady in Antwerp, a modest appointment appropriate to a young professional singer. By 1446 he was working for Charles I, duke of Bourbon, and in 1451 he joined the chapel of Charles VII, king of France, whom he would serve for the rest of his career, residing mainly in Tours, where he held the prestigious and well-remunerated post of treasurer at the royal collegiate church of St-Martin. Ockeghem was esteemed by his contemporaries and successors as a master beyond compare, learned and skilled as both singer and composer, virtuous, generous, and kind. Upon Ockeghem's death on February 6, 1497, he was mourned by numerous musicians and poets. His surviving works include a dozen settings of the Ordinary of the Mass, a Requiem, four motets, and about two dozen songs.

Today we explore a complex of interrelated works which seems to have originated in a song by one Barbingant. Apparently undocumented in archival records, Barbingant is known to us by a handful of ascriptions in musical sources from the 1460s and 1470s. His songs enjoyed considerable success: one, *L'omme banny de sa plaisance*, is found in no less than ten sources, while a phrase from another, *Au travail suis*, provided words and music for the opening of Ockeghem's *Ma maistresse*, and Ockeghem took the song as a model for his *Missa Au travail suis*. In fact, *Au travail suis* was so highly regarded that one scribe ascribed it to Ockeghem himself. Modern scholarship has been divided on the question, but Barbingant's authorship seems most likely.

To be completely scrupulous, it is not certain whether Ockeghem's song borrowed the "Ma maistresse" figure from *Au travail suis* or if the loan went the other direction, but several points argue in favor of the former. Not least, *Ma maistresse* raises the stakes on *Au travail suis*, for where Barbingant sets his "Ma maistresse" motif in imitation at the octave, Ockeghem employs imitation at the fifth, a rather more difficult, and in the 1450s, rarer technical maneuver.

Fifteenth-century composers absorbed secular melodies into sacred music with great frequency and freedom, basing numerous Mass cycles and motets on preexisting music drawn from songs, which were often quoted in such a way as to be immediately recognizable to the listener. Far from violating propriety, the use of song melodies was meant to offer enlightening parallels to the listener; the poetic texts they evoked suggested metaphors or analogies by which humans might attempt to comprehend their relationship to God.

The most obvious and most common analogy made available by courtly love was between the unattainable object of desire and Mary, and the virelai *Ma maistresse* provides an exquisite example. The poem merits a rubric like that given by the Burgundian court chronicler and poet Jean Molinet to his *Dame sans per*: "Poem that may be addressed either to the Virgin Mary or by a lover to his lady." *Ma maistresse* speaks of a lady "perfect in good qualities, if ever a woman was, / She alone whose reputation and fame it is / To be without peer," of the speaker's urgent desire to see her and his hope for her pity. The song is one of Ockeghem's most bewitching creations, and its soaring melodies lend an air of enchantment to the Mass based on it—a Mass that, according to an allegorical interpretation, may have originally been intended for a Marian feast or a Lady Chapel. Unfortunately, only the Kyrie and Gloria of the *Missa Ma maistresse* remain, although a complete cycle may once have existed.

No two of Ockeghem's Masses sound quite the same or address formal problems in the same manner. As Fabrice Fitch observes, "Most of them present a highly distinctive profile, determined by features peculiar to the one work alone. Thus, the soundscapes of individual works vary considerably..." The distinctive features of the *Missa Au travail suis* include its unusual scoring, with two lower parts moving in the same range; its brevity, which relates it to a *Missa brevis* tradition centered in Milan; and its ambiguous relationship to its model: after citing the song's tenor literally in the Kyrie, it then seemingly abandons all reference to the song, aside from the head-motif of each Mass movement. As so often with Ockeghem, there seems to be no explanation of these mysteries—and as always, the musical result is ineffably rich and strange.

Although based throughout on plainchant and otherwise unrelated to *Au travail suis*, the *Credo sine nomine* shares material with the Credo of the *Missa Au travail suis* in one passage, that setting the words "Et incarnatus...et homo factus

est.” It is unclear which work quotes which, but the quotation of a Credo based on chant in a freely composed Mass based on song, or vice versa, is characteristic of Ockeghem, at once playful and serious, allusive, and densely layered.

Among the sacred works and elevated sentiments of the rest of the program, *Cent mil escuz* appears the odd one out. What is this decidedly mundane song—composed by the memorably named Firminus Caron, praised by Tinctoris alongside Ockeghem—doing in such company? The song’s last phrase, setting the words “Aulcunefoiz quant je pourroye,” is a close match for the opening point of imitation of *Ma maistresse*, but here extended to involve the third voice as well. This may not seem like much of connection, but a considerably bawdier poem, found in a handful of late sources, (and not included on today’s program), seems to imply a real liaison between *Cent mille escuz* and *Ma maistresse*. Reader, I blush to print it, but such is the record of our past.

La teneur de cent mille escuz	A hundred thousand escuz in hand
Et le dessus de ma maistresse	and a position atop my mistress
Je soubzhaitte pour prendre liesse	is what I want for happiness,
Et ne faire guerre que a culz.	and not making war except on asses.

Just in case anyone fails to perceive the reference to two songs, the author underlines it with an obvious pun: the final return to the refrain can be read as “But with Bacchus I would sing / The tenor of *Cent mille escuz* / And the top part of *Ma maistresse*.”

Two works on the program stand entirely outside the *Au travail suis* complex. We open the concert with the splendid *Celsitonantis ave genitrix* by Ockeghem’s near-exact contemporary, Johannes Regis, a pioneer of the five-voice motet and perhaps the author of this motet’s rather over-ambitiously classicizing text. (Its numerous errors have been emended by Leofranc Holford-Strevens.)

The other work unrelated to *Au travail suis* is the anonymous song *En attendant vostre venue*, but the song has more connections to our program than might appear. *En attendant* is found uniquely in a songbook that returned to light just three years ago, the first major rediscovery in the field of fifteenth-century song since before the Second World War. Now safely entrusted to the Alamire Foundation in Leuven, Belgium, and known as the *Leuven Chansonnier*, the songbook, probably copied in the 1470s in France, contains fifty songs, including *Au travail suis*, *Ma maistresse*, and *Cent mil escuz* (with a unique last strophe, which we sing in this concert). Many of the songs in the Leuven songbook are fifteenth-century top hits transmitted in numerous other manuscripts. There are also twelve songs that are unique to it, which have been wholly unknown until now. Among them, *En attendant* caught my eye because its fourth line, “Quant de vous seul je pers la veue,” is also the first line of a song by Ockeghem. Today’s performance of *En attendant*, which is very likely the first since the fifteenth century and certainly an American premiere, offers a small taste of the “new” repertory in the *Leuven Chansonnier*, which has just been made public and has barely begun to be studied. Blue Heron plans to feature much more in future seasons.

As for Barbingant, whoever he was, he seems to have died before Ockeghem and ascended to heaven, where Guillaume Crétin’s *Déploration...sur le trépas de Jean Okeghem* records him among the choir of musicians who welcome Ockeghem by singing his works—including, among no less than three settings of the Ordinary and the Requiem, the *Missa Au travail suis*. Barbingant must have been pleased.

—Scott Metcalfe